

Congresswoman Expresses Humanitarian Concerns and Offers U.S. Cooperation

Washington, D.C. – Congresswoman Betty McCollum (D-MN) traveled to Syria from Jordan today to meet with President Bashar al-Assad about the plight of up to 1.5 million Iraqi refugees who have fled to Syria since the beginning of the Iraq war. Rep. McCollum conveyed U.S. desire for cooperation to alleviate the refugee situation as part of a week-long trip to evaluate how Jordan and Syria are coping with millions of displaced Iraqis.

“Since the U.S. invasion of Iraq, millions of Iraqi refugees have fled to Syria and Jordan, taxing the scarce resources in these countries,” McCollum said. “I told President Assad that I understand the major challenges this presents for his country, and that I want our government to engage in a positive way to help meet the needs of refugees and restore stability in the region – by providing more visas and working to allow more nongovernmental organizations to offer support services to refugees.”

On Tuesday, several busloads of returning refugees made a high-profile departure from Syria to Iraq, but an estimated 1.2 to 1.5 million remain in Syria. The vast majority of these refugees are not expected to return to Iraq in the near future because they face grave danger there. Displaced Iraqis continue to face uncertainty as infrastructure and resources in Syria and Jordan are stretched

beyond their capacity.

Before leaving on her trip, McCollum spoke with U.S. State Department officials, including Ambassador James Foley, President Bush's appointed Senior Coordinator for Iraqi Refugee Issues. Ambassador Foley offered strong support of McCollum's visit and efforts to work with Jordan and Syria to aid Iraqi refugees.

Rep. McCollum travels back to Jordan later this week, and returns to the United States on Monday. Anyone seeking an interview with the Congresswoman about her trip should contact Press Secretary Bryan Collinsworth at (202) 225-6631.

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